



## Office of Professional Accountability Review Board

Seattle City Council Briefing  
April 7, 2003

As we approach the first anniversary of our appointment to Seattle's first civilian police oversight board, the OPA Review Board greatly appreciates this opportunity to brief the full City Council. As you may have gleaned from our first two quarterly reports, in this first year we have logged many, many hours studying and meeting with individual Seattle citizens, community groups, and rank-and-file police officers and command staff, as well as academics and fellow civilian oversight boards across the country. We have worked hard to get to know and trust each other as a team, and are now finalizing our comprehensive strategic plan. We have, in short, come a very long way in this first year, and remain committed to the fundamental goal of strengthening the relationships between community and law enforcement in Seattle through fair and efficient civilian oversight of the Office of Professional Accountability.

We are grateful for the support and encouragement of the Council's Committee on Police, Fire, Courts & Technology, and in particular its chairman, Jim Compton. We have enjoyed a very good working relationship with the OPA Director, Sam Pailca, and her assistant, John Fowler. We have especially come to value the wisdom and insights gained from the OPA Auditor, Judge Terrence Carroll. And we are certainly looking forward to Council's approval of our recommendation to amend the underlying OPA ordinance to authorize biannual instead of quarterly reports.

A year ago you asked us, a citizens' board, to let you know how well Seattle's unique system for ensuring police accountability is working. The perspective gained from that year on the job now permits us to share some serious concerns with you. We will outline three main issues today which we believe impinge upon sound public policy in the area of police accountability.

First, Seattle honors its police force with the privilege—not a right—to investigate allegations of wrongdoing against its own. Council sought to balance this privilege by creating a unique model: the OPA Director, a civilian, reports to the Chief of Police in the course of her day-to-day administration of the OPA's internal investigations section. We believe, however (a belief echoed by many of our fellow citizens), that the OPA Director is perceived as too close to the police command structure to be truly representative of citizen concerns and perspectives. The Director's office is physically located in the new police headquarters building, practically next door to the police chief's office. While there are probably operational efficiencies achieved in this arrangement, such close proximity creates the appearance that there is no real civilian oversight because the "civilian" director has been effectively absorbed into the command structure.

We have come to realize, moreover, that this arrangement may well serve to alienate not only civilians, but rank-and-file police officers as well. We recommend that the Director and the SPD begin to plan for a restructuring that will allow the OPA Director to perform her duties with greater autonomy. The Review Board volunteers to assist in that planning.

Second, we have previously reported on the obvious overlap in functions of the Review Board and the OPA Auditor. While the job of police oversight is complex and may be accomplished by many varying means, it is vital that the process be fair, efficient, and clearly understood by everyone concerned. We recognize that an appointment to replace the current OPA Auditor is pending, but we must question the wisdom of making any such appointment hastily, prior to completion of a comprehensive review of the respective roles and functions of the OPA Director, the Auditor, and the Review Board. We are anxious to assist in this comprehensive review, which could be accomplished in a matter of weeks, not months.

Finally, we are frankly in the dark about the position of the Mayor's Office with respect to the OPA generally and the Review Board specifically. While we have initiated two brief and cordial meetings with the Mayor's senior policy advisor for police matters, we have been unable to establish any regular communications link to coordinate the Mayor's initiatives on police-community relations and the Review Board's work on police accountability. It is conceivable, for instance, that assimilation of the civilian OPA Director into the command staff and appointment of a replacement OPA Auditor as discussed above result from a carefully crafted executive plan. However, no such plan has ever been communicated to the OPA Review Board.

Moreover, our strategic plan requires us to evaluate the Board's own effectiveness; while we meet regularly with and receive input from the police, citizens and City Council, the present communication disconnect with the Mayor's Office makes it difficult to determine the efficacy of our work in the context of City-wide initiatives. It almost goes without saying that the Review Board, like the OPA itself, cannot succeed in the important goal of furthering police accountability without a carefully conceived and effective communications flow that threads its way through all of the relevant functions of this City.

Again, we appreciate your time and interest today. We look forward to working with you into the future to make Seattle a safer place to live for all its citizens. Thank you.